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## THE WRITING AND DRAMATIZATION OF THE EIGHTH-GRADE PLAY

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With the purpose of making the work in English as interesting, practical, and vital to the pupils as possible we tried various methods, searching for the motive that appealed to them most strongly. We asked them to write letters, give talks, write accounts of their own experiences, relate stories that interested them. The suggestion of writing and dramatizing a play made the strongest appeal. The fact that this play was to be presented as a part of the graduation exercises of the class aroused every member to action. Every pupil from the brightest in the class to the one most lacking in imagination began to rack his brain for suggestions.

The questions to be answered in selecting the type of play to be given were these: Should the play be historical, basing its incidents on facts and representing historical characters? Should it be geographical, depicting life in some foreign land? Should it be a representation of a boy's struggle to attain some worthy success? There was a definite answer to each question. The pupils of the training school had at different times given Lincoln plays; the class finishing the preceding year had given a historical play; therefore the historical type was abandoned. The eighth grade had just given a Japanese play, and the class did not wish to follow with another of the geographical type. The suggestion concerning a struggle for success found favor in the minds of the majority, and it was unanimously decided that the play should describe a boy's struggle and victory in the achievement of success. It spoke well for the class that with one or two exceptions all suggested that the attainment of an education and the living of an unselfish life should be the success striven for by the hero of the play. With the type of play decided, the pupils proceeded to give

suggestions for the climax, which should serve as a basis for the organization of the plot and from which the acts could be outlined. It was decided that the climax should come at the point where the hero overcame a temptation that gripped him, and made a decision that affected his life from that moment. The opening scenes were to lead up to the climax, furnishing a setting for it, and the closing scenes were to lead quickly to the conclusion in order not to weaken the climax.

During the composition recitation period the pupils gave their suggestions for the first act. When each one had spoken his mind, the various suggestions were carefully considered, the teacher and pupils criticizing them freely and rejecting those that were inconsistent and least valuable. As an assignment for the next lesson each pupil was to write the first act, using the chosen suggestions and adding more of his own if new ones came to him. The teacher collected the writings of the pupils, corrected them, marked the best suggestions in them, and read them to the class. After discussing them, the class agreed to permit a committee of two from their number to take the best suggestions from each paper and make the final writing of the act. After correcting and, if necessary, revising the work of the committee, the teacher read to the class the completed act. Each act was worked out in this way.

The name chosen for the play was *Tom Morgan of Boonville*. Tom, the hero, first appeared in the latter part of scene 1 of Act I. "Tom's View of Education," scene 1, was followed in scene 2 by a humiliating experience which Tom was forced to endure as a result of his lack of education. Scene 2 was named "Tom's Mistake." In Act II, "Tom in Disgrace," the hero did not appear very heroic, but was disheartened by the trouble his boyish pranks had brought upon him. There were two scenes in Act III—"Tom's Temptation" and "Tom's Decision." In this act was the climax to which the preceding acts had led. In Act IV, "Tom's Victory," the play led quickly to its conclusion, showing Tom graduating from the Academy and on the road to the greatest success a boy can attain, the living of an honorable, useful life.

Who should take the part of Tom? was the first question to be considered when the pupils had arranged the list of thirteen char-

acters required in the play. The class realized that the boy who played Tom's part must be capable of appearing mischievous, careless, and conceited in the first part, and in the second, honest, trustworthy, serious, determined, and triumphant. After a careful study of each character the class voted by ballot for the ones whom they wished to have take the various parts. When the result was known the teacher suggested a change in the decision with regard to one of the parts. The class readily agreed to the suggestion and acted upon it. Evidently the desire to select the person best fitted for the part outweighed any petty personal preferences the pupils may have had in their choice of characters.

Since the play was set in the year 1856, the costumes were planned to be in keeping with that time. It was not a very difficult task for the four girls in the play to provide themselves with dresses, bonnets, and wraps. The mothers cheerfully ransacked their attics for old-fashioned garments, and the neighbors kindly lent from their store of old clothing. The boys representing the nine male characters had a much harder task. Long coats, high hats, old-fashioned collars, shirts, and ties were easily found, but "boots," which the boys felt were a necessary part of their costumes, were very hard to find. After much inquiry among the older people of the town, and after a consultation with the shoe dealer, a few pairs were procured. The teacher sent out of town for a pair she knew of, and at last the troublesome question of boots was settled. The pupils planned the stage-setting with the purpose of making the change of scenery between acts as easy as possible. The scenery for the country store was the most important and required the most planning. There were many things, such as counters, post-office boxes, scales, barrels, boxes, supplies, a stove, chairs, etc., to be gathered for the store. Each pupil had a list of articles he was responsible for. It was decided that the store scene could be used for Act I, scene 2, for all of Act II, and for Act III, scene 2. This left only the sitting-room scene used in Act II, scene 1, and Act III, scene 2, and the hall scene of Act IV to be planned. The stage-settings for these were very simple and easy to get ready. The history museum of the normal school furnished many articles that were used in the play. The

old-fashioned chairs, the clock, candlesticks, and the pistol used by the burglar in the play were some of the things kindly lent from the museum by the head of the history department.

The time to be spent in practicing for the play was short, and it was necessary to plan the rehearsals to secure the quickest and best results. It was evident that if the pupils read each scene aloud very carefully before attempting to dramatize it, many errors of pronunciation, enunciation, inflection, and voice quality would be avoided in the dramatization, and much time would be saved. Whenever it could be arranged the pupils practiced in the auditorium that they might become accustomed to suiting their actions and conversation to a large space.

The class sold many tickets for their play, and a large audience assembled on the important night, although the weather was unfavorable. The play was a success and was well received. Some of the characters who had seemed lacking in force and freedom of expression during the rehearsals surprised their teachers and friends by the spirit and interpretation they put into their lines, showing that they had really profited by the numerous and oft-repeated suggestions given them. The excitement of the final rendering and the knowledge that the success of the play depended on them seemed to bring out latent powers of expression. Each pupil seemed to enjoy the giving of pleasure to others through his effort. The hero, "Tom," was very natural in his interpretation of a careless, mischievous boy, a tempted boy, and a triumphant, steady, fun-loving student. The girls were quaint and attractive in their old-fashioned gowns. The burglar was cool, calm, fierce, and daring; and the men gathered around the stove in the store discussed their neighbors in true country-store style. The pompous, middle-aged, red-whiskered bachelor of the town as he gave Tom a "calling down" for playing tricks upon him managed to show in every tone and action that he, Hiram Judd, was a person of considerable importance. Throughout the performance of the play the pupils waiting their turn were quiet and orderly behind the scenes, an indication that where there is true interest the problem of discipline is greatly lessened if not eliminated.

The writing and dramatization of the play were a training in imagination, judgment, and organization. In offering suggestions the pupils had to use their imaginations freely. The weighing of the many suggestions in order to select the most worthy ones called for judgment of values. The gathering up of the various points and giving each its proper setting called for organization. In striving to write the acts of the play in the most effective manner the pupils felt the need of a good working knowledge of the principles of grammar. The endeavor to represent each character throughout the play true to his particular characteristics fostered consistency and at the same time allowed freedom in the delineation of the attributes of the character. Perhaps the greatest benefit derived from the play was the value it placed on class spirit and community effort. The class felt that they were undertaking a task the success of which depended upon harmonious, united effort. There were differences of opinion, but no discourteous disputes. When one member of the class gave signs of neglect of duty at rehearsals, the class showed its disapproval; and he soon mended his ways, not wishing to be the weak link in the chain. When graduation day was over both teachers and pupils felt that time and effort had been spent in a worthy cause, that the writing and dramatization of the eighth-grade play had been worth while.